



HUMAN RIGHTS / FAIR HOUSING COMMISSION OF THE CITY AND COUNTY OF SACRAMENTO



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Office of the Fiscal Assistant Secretary
U.D. Department of Treasury, Room 2112
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To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing on behalf of the Human Rights/Fair Housing Commission to urge Treasury to *prohibit* check cashers and other "payment service providers" from providing recipients access to electronic federal benefits, as part of EFT'99. Check cashers prey upon low-income consumers and deny their customer the consumer protections provided at mainstream financial institutions.

The Human Rights/Fair Housing Commission is a joint City and County agency established in 1963 to resolve complaints in the areas of housing, employment, and public accommodation discrimination.

Since 1963, the role of the Commission has expanded to include educational forums and seminars; printing and distribution of educational brochures and handbooks; a Landlord/Tenant Information Line; mediation of Unlawful Detainer cases; networking with the public and private sectors to facilitate equal housing opportunities in the City and County of Sacramento; and since September of 1997, providing and servicing the Small Claims Advisory Clinic.

Treasury began EFT'99 with the stated goal of bringing the unbanked into the financial mainstream. Allowing check cashers to be the access point for federal benefits recipients to receive their funds, however, does exactly the opposite. Check cashers force consumers to pay excessive fees for transactions that should be available to them at a reasonable cost. For instance, in California check cashers charge an annual percentage rate of almost 400% for a payday loan! With interest rates this high, recipients are prevented from having access to their benefits at a reasonable cost.

Check cashers also provide few consumer protections that they would receive if they banked at a federally insured financial institution.. If federal benefits recipients have an account with such fringe bankers, check cashers may withhold federal funds as payment for past sums owed to the check casher.

By allowing check cashers to provide access to federal funds, Treasury will not only condone but stimulate the abusive practices of check cashers. While the customer will go to the check casher to receive her federal benefits, she may also become a potential customer for numerous other abusive transactions. The number of check cashers has doubled since 1990, and is steadily growing. This profitable industry makes no reinvestment back into the low income communities in which they operate.

It is time Treasury made EFT'99 a program that truly protects consumers and ensures that low income recipients are not relegated to a position outside the financial mainstream. Please prohibit arrangements wherein recipients of electronic federal payment gain access to benefits through non-depository payment service providers.

Sincerely,

Barbara Lehman
Executive Director

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